

A Monogram Countermark on a Dodecanummion Discovered in “Marea”/Philoxenite

SZYMON JELLONEK

Countermarks on Roman coins were common during the Principate. They were struck on coins for various purposes: to prolong the circulation of older and worn coins, to change their value, or to spread propaganda.¹ This procedure disappeared in the third century, during the financial crisis, and did not return until Byzantine times, in the seventh century.² It is generally believed that in the case of Egypt, neither in the Principate nor in Byzantine times were coins countermarked.³ However, during archaeological investigations at “Marea”/Philoxenite, a Byzantine dodecanummion with a stamped countermark was discovered in 2019.

More than nine thousand coins have been found during the excavations conducted in “Marea”/Philoxenite since 2000 by the Polish Centre of

Mediterranean Archaeology.⁴ They represent a broad chronological range, stretching from Hellenistic to Umayyad times. Late Roman *minimi* dominate (ca. 50 percent), while Byzantine coins are also well represented (ca. 20 percent).⁵ Most of the coins struck during the Byzantine period (497–645) are dodecanummia minted in Alexandria. A puzzling countermark, hitherto unknown to scholars, was discovered on one coin of this type.

In this article, I explore the potential circumstances behind the minting of the countermark on the Alexandrian dodecanummion. Given the available evidence, the most plausible scenario is that the countermark was applied in Egypt during the last phase of the Byzantine presence or shortly after the Arab conquest (642). The phenomenon of the countermark is

1 C. Howgego, *Greek Imperial Countermarks: Studies in the Provincial Coinage of the Roman Empire*, Royal Numismatic Society Special Publication 17 (London, 2005), 4–14.

2 K. Economides, “Byzantine Folles Countermarked with Heraclian Monograms Found in Cyprus,” *NC* 163 (2003): 193–204; W. Schulze and T. Goodwin, “Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria,” *Supplement to Oriental Numismatic Society Newsletter*, no. 183 (2005): 23–56; W. Schulze, “The Byzantine ‘Eagle’ Countermark—Re-Attributed from Egypt to Palestine,” *Israel Numismatic Research* 4 (2009): 113–20; D. Woods, “The Byzantine Eagle Countermark: Creating a Pseudo-Consular Coinage under the Heraclii?,” *GRBS* 55 (2015): 927–45.

3 Howgego, *Greek Imperial Countermarks*, x, 16; Schulze, “The Byzantine ‘Eagle’ Countermark.”

4 Excavations have been carried out by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (University of Warsaw) and the Archaeological Museum in Kraków. Only a small number of coins have so far been published: B. Lichocka, “Coins from Baths and Saqiyah,” in *Marea*, vol. 1, *Byzantine Marea, Excavations in 2000–2003 and 2006*, ed. H. Szymańska and K. Babraj (Kraków, 2008), 145–51; D. Mularczyk, “Umayyad Coins,” in Szymańska and Babraj, *Byzantine Marea*, 153–54; B. Lichocka, “Un rouleau de folles decouvert a Marea (Egypt),” in *Crossing Time and Space: To Commemorate Hanna Szymańska*, ed. K. Mysliwiec and A. Ryś (Warsaw, 2020), 147–58.

5 P. Jaworski, “Preliminary Notes on the Coins Found in Marea/Philoxenite: A Byzantine City in the Hinterland of Alexandria,” in *Per Mediterraneum: La moneta tra Nord ed Europa Occidentale in età antica e post-antica*, ed. M. Asolati, Numismatica Patavina 15 (Padua, 2023), 37–48.

multidimensional. First, countermarks on dodecanummia from Alexandria have so far not been reported in scholarly publications. Second, the specific countermark discussed here (a cruciform monogram read as Βασιλειος) is also previously unknown. Third, the discovery in an archaeological context of an Alexandrian coin with a countermark can help researchers understand the underrecognized process of the Arab conquest of Egypt.⁶

“Marea”/Philoxenite

“Marea”/Philoxenite is a town located on the southern shore of Lake Mareotis.⁷ It had its heyday in Byzantine times (sixth century), when it was a stopping place on the pilgrim route from Alexandria to the famous shrine of St. Menas at Abu Mena.⁸

The first excavations at the site were carried out between 1977 and 1979 by Fawzi el-Fakharany.⁹ Since 2000, excavations have been continued by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology. While the research of the Archaeological Museum in Kraków is concentrating on the basilica (the second largest after Abu Mena among the known churches in Egypt) and

its neighborhood,¹⁰ the mission from the University of Warsaw (UW) has uncovered key elements of the urban layout.¹¹ It was possible to establish the course of the main streets, as well as the modular design of the city.¹² In addition, during recent seasons (2021–2022), further churches were also discovered, along with baptisteries, in the southern part of the city.¹³

During the 2018–2019 seasons, projects conducted by the UW mission included research north of the basilica in the S5 complex.¹⁴ In its northern part, in room S5 2B, a floor made of limestone was discovered in 2018. The following year a small trial trench (1.1 × 1.2 m) was delineated, the floor removed, and three archaeological contexts underneath explored.¹⁵ In one of them (S.U. 2), 6 stray coins (2 minimi, 1 dodecanummion, 1 Umayyad coin, 2 AE blanks) were discovered. In another context (S.U. 3), half of a cut, illegible coin from the Hellenistic Roman period was found. The above-mentioned dodecanummion contains a countermark not recorded in the literature. Unfortunately, owing to the chaotically mixed and overall meager archaeological finds, it was not possible to determine the function of the room, though its proximity to the quay suggests that it might have been related to the harbor infrastructure.¹⁶

6 The Arab conquest of Egypt has been reconsidered by Phil Booth, who notes that “modern conceptions of the conquest of Egypt still depend upon research which predates the First World War”: “The Muslim Conquest of Egypt Reconsidered,” *TM* 17 (2013): 639–70, at 641. Recently, the Byzantine reoccupation of Alexandria in 645/646 has been called into question. See M. Jankowiak, “P.Lond. I 113.10, the Exile of Patriarch Kyros of Alexandria, and the Arab Conquest of Egypt,” in *Mélanges James Howard-Johnston*, ed. P. Booth and M. Whitby, *TM* 26 (Paris, 2022), 310.

7 On the ancient name of the site, see M. Rodziewicz, “On Interpretations of Archaeological Evidence Concerning Marea and Philoxenite,” in *Lake Mareotis: Reconstructing the Past. Proceedings of the International Conference on the Archaeology of the Mareotic Region Held at Alexandria University, Egypt, 5th–6th April 2008*, ed. L. Blue, BAR International Series 2113 (Oxford, 2010), 67–74; H. Szymańska and K. Babraj, “Marea or Philoxenite? Polish Excavations in the Mareotic Region 2000–2007,” in Blue, *Lake Mareotis*, 75–84; E. Wipszycka, “Marea and Philoxenite: Where to Locate Them?,” *Études et Travaux* 25 (2012): 417–32; and T. Derda, “‘Marea’ ad Aegyptum: New Research and New Documents,” in Mysliwiec and Ryś, *Crossing Time and Space*, 61–74, at 61–63.

8 K. Babraj and H. Szymańska, “Badania bazyliki i mol w Marei w Egipcie,” *Materiały archeologiczne* 39 (2013): 169–94, at 169.

9 F. El-Fakharany, “Recent Excavations at Marea in Egypt,” in *Das römisch-byzantinische Ägypten*, ed. P. von Zabern (Mainz, 1983), 175–86.

10 Babraj and Szymańska, “Badania bazyliki i mol w Marei w Egipcie.”

11 T. Derda, M. Gwiazda, and A. Pawlikowska-Gwiazda, “Development of a Settlement on the Northeastern Promontory at ‘Marea,’” *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 29.2 (2020): 531–50; T. Derda et al., “Excavations in the Northern and Eastern Parts of the Byzantine Town at Marea,” *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 29.2 (2020): 551–76; M. Gwiazda, T. Derda, and T. Barański, “From Roman Industrial Center to Early Islamic Town: Archaeological Excavations at ‘Marea’/Philoxenite in the 2020–2021 Field Season,” *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 31 (2022): 333–73.

12 M. Gwiazda, “Modular Designs at the Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Site of Philoxenite, Egypt,” *JRA* (2023): 1–19.

13 Gwiazda, Derda, and Barański, “From Roman Industrial Center to Early Islamic Town.”

14 T. Derda, M. Gwiazda, and A. Pawlikowska-Gwiazda, “Excavations in the Area East and North of the Great Basilica,” in *Marea Report 2018*, ed. T. Derda (Warsaw, 2018), 11–12; A. Pawlikowska-Gwiazda, “Excavation in Area S5,” in *Marea Report 2019*, ed. T. Derda (Warsaw, 2019), 35–36.

15 Pawlikowska-Gwiazda, “Excavation in Area S5,” 36.

16 Personal communication with Mariusz Gwiazda.

Dodecanummion MIB 209/DOC 197

The discovered bronze coin is a dodecanummion struck during the reign of Heraclius (Fig. 1). The obverse shows the outlines of three figures: Heraclius and his two sons, Heraclius Constantine and Heracleonas. A circular countermark with a cross monogram is stamped on the right side (Fig. 2). The more legible reverse bears the standard 12-nummi-I B designation, as well as a cross on the letter M in the center. In the exergue is the mint mark of Alexandria: ΑΛΕΞ. The coin, which is 20 mm in diameter and weighs 7.3 g, corresponds to the type MIB 209/DOC 197.

Issues with depictions of the three emperors generally date to the last years of Heraclius’s reign (between 630/1 and 641).¹⁷ Coins of this type circulated in the Nile Delta area even after the Arab conquest (642), until at least the reform of Abd al-Malik in 696/7.¹⁸ The numismatic data obtained during the “Marea”/Philoxenite excavations confirm this phenomenon and even extend this period to the first half of the eighth century.¹⁹ In fact, as noted, the dodecanummion in question was discovered in the same layer (S.U. 2) as the Umayyad coin.

The obverse of this type is devoid of a legend, while the reverse features the aforementioned inscriptions. The large letter M positioned between the I and the B has been variously interpreted. J. R. Phillips and Cécile Morrisson believe that it signifies the equating of the value of the Alexandrian dodecanummion with the imperial follis.²⁰ Wolfgang Hahn, on the other hand, observes that the weight of the dodecanummion exceeds that of the follis and hypothesizes that the



Fig. 1. Countermarked dodecanummion of Heraclius, “Marea”/Philoxenite, inventory no. M190257. Courtesy of Piotr Jaworski, principal investigator of the project Coin Circulation in the Byzantine and Umayyad Marea / North Hawwariya: Studies in the Monetary Economy of Mareotis Region in the Hinterland of Alexandria”; photo by Piotr Jaworski.



Fig. 2. Closeup of the countermark.

17 For 630/1–641, see J. R. Phillips, “The Byzantine Bronze Coins of Alexandria in the Seventh Century,” *NC* 2 (1962): 225–41, at 229–30; for 637/638–641, W. Hahn, *Moneta Imperii Byzantini*, vol. 3, *Von Heraclius bis Leo III., Alleinregierung (610–720)* (Vienna, 1981), 115; for 631–632, L. Domaszewicz and M. Bates, “The Copper Coinage of Egypt in the Seventh Century,” in *Fustat Finds: Beads, Coins, Medical Instruments, Textiles, and Other Artifacts from the Awad Collection*, ed. J. Bacharach (Cairo, 2002), 88–111, at 90.

18 Domaszewicz and Bates, “The Copper Coinage of Egypt in the Seventh Century.”

19 Jaworski, “Preliminary Notes on the Coins Found in Marea/Philoxenite,” 44.

20 Phillips, “Byzantine Bronze Coins of Alexandria,” 236; C. Morrisson, *Catalogue des monnaies byzantines de la Bibliothèque nationale*, vol. 1, *D’Anastase I^{er} à Justinien II (491–711)* (Paris, 1970), 296.

M has religious significance,²¹ in which case I propose reading the abbreviation as *μόνος*. More recently, David Woods has interpreted the M as *μυστήριον* (mystery): in connection with the juxtaposition of the M with the cross, the mystery in question would be the crucifixion of Christ.²² However, in this case the countermark is the most relevant element for analyzing the coin.

21 Hahn, *Moneta Imperii Byzantini*, 3:115.

22 D. Woods, “Deciphering the Dodecanummi of Heraclius and Constans II,” *Israel Numismatic Research* 13 (2018): 195–207, at 203–4.

Countermarks on Byzantine Coins

As already mentioned, countermarks were common in the first centuries of the Roman Empire. Of the several reasons why they were marked, three are the most important: to devalue existing currency, to reaffirm existing currency, and to spread propaganda.²³ After a hiatus of three centuries, countermarks commonly appear again on Byzantine coins in the early seventh century in many regions of the empire.²⁴ In this context, Syria, where Wolfgang Schulze and Tony Goodwin recognized eight groups of countermarks, particularly stands out.²⁵ Among them are countermarks containing Greek monograms.²⁶ In Cyprus, too, the number of countermarked coins from the seventh century is significant.²⁷ Specific countermarks appear in Sicily²⁸ and in the Crimea.²⁹ The situation is quite different when it comes to coins from Egypt. In the scholarly literature,

I have not come across any Byzantine coins produced in Alexandria containing a countermark.

During the Principate, Egypt remained a region with closed monetary circulation.³⁰ This changed with the reform of Diocletian.³¹ But as a result of Anastasius's reform, the monetary policy in the region again became different from that of the rest of the empire,³² though the first coins of the new type were not minted in Egypt until the time of Justin I.³³ That Egypt was an anomaly is evident in the divergence from standard denominations (33, 12, 6, 3 nummi) and the absence of countermarks on Alexandrian seventh-century coins.³⁴ The one exception is the countermark on the coin discussed here.

Thus, as presented, we are dealing with a completely unique countermarked dodecanummion of Heraclius. It is worth noting at this point that until recently, another enigmatic countermark depicting an eagle (type 8, in Schulze and Goodwin's classification) was believed to be linked to Egypt.³⁵ This conclusion was drawn by James Goehring after two folles with such a countermark were found at Jabal al-Tarif near Nag Hammadi during archaeological investigations.³⁶ Another exemplar has been recently discovered, also in

23 Howgego, *Greek Imperial Countermarks* (n. 1 above), 4–14.

24 A. R. Bellinger, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*, vol. 1, *Anastasius I to Maurice, 491–602* (Washington, DC, 1966), 53–54; Economides, “Byzantine Folles Countermarked with Heraclian Monograms” (n. 2 above), 193; Schulze and Goodwin, “Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria” (n. 2 above), 23–29; G. Bijovsky, *Gold Coin and Small Change: Monetary Circulation in Fifth–Seventh Century Byzantine Palestine* (Trieste, 2012), 397.

25 Schulze and Goodwin, “Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria,” 23–40.

26 Classes 1–4, 7, according to Schulze and Goodwin, “Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria,” 23–24, 25–29; see also D. Woods, “Greek Monograms and Countermarks in Seventh-Century Syria,” in *Coinage and History in the Seventh-Century Near East 6*, ed. T. Goodwin (London, 2020), 101–20.

27 J. Warren, “On Some Coins of Constans II and His Sons, Discovered in the Island of Cyprus,” *NC* 1 (1861): 42–55; Economides, “Byzantine Folles Countermarked with Heraclian Monograms,” 193–204; D. M. Metcalf, “Byzantine, Islamic, and Crusader Coins from Saranda Kolones, Paphos,” *NC* 163 (2003): 205–26; J. Bodzek, “Byzantine Coins from the Jagiellonian University Excavations,” in *Nummi et Humanitas Studia Ofiarowane Profesorowi Stanisławowi Suchodolskiemu w 80 Rocznicę Urodzin*, ed. M. Bogucki et al. (Warsaw, 2017), 39–52, at 45–47.

28 A. R. Bellinger and P. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*, vol. 2, pt. 1, *Phocas and Heraclius (602–641)* (Washington, DC, 1966), 54; G. Guzzetta, “La moneta nella Sicilia bizantina,” in *La Siciliana bizantina: Storia, città e territorio*, ed. M. Congiu, S. Modeo, and M. Arnone (Caltanissetta, 2010), 169–88, at 173–76.

29 V. Golenko, “Gegenstempel auf Chersoner Münzen des Maurikios Tiberios,” *HBN* 18/19 (1964/1965): 5–12; P. Grierson, “The Crimean

Countermarks of Heraclius,” *NC* 6 (1966): 221–24; Bellinger, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins*, vol. 1, 54; Hahn, *Moneta Imperii Byzantini*, 3:122.

30 A. Johnson and L. West, *Currency in Roman and Byzantine Egypt* (Amsterdam, 1967), 1; A. Burnett, M. Amandry, and P. Ripollès, *Roman Provincial Coinage*, vol. 1, *From the Death of Caesar to the Death of Vitellius (44BC–AD69)*, pt. 1, *Introduction and Catalogue* (London–Paris, 1992), 13; A. Geissen, “The Nome Coins of Roman Egypt,” in *Coinage and Identity in Roman Provinces*, ed. C. Howgego et al. (Oxford, 2005), 167–70.

31 Johnson and West, *Currency in Roman and Byzantine Egypt*, 97.

32 H. Noeske, *Münzfunde as Ägypten I*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 2000), 1:128–29; Bijovsky, *Gold Coin and Small Change*, 298.

33 W. Hahn with M. A. Metlich, *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire: (Anastasius I–Justinian I, 491–565)* (Vienna, 2013), 37.

34 Noeske notes none in his monumental work, *Münzfunde as Ägypten I*.

35 On the eagle countermark, see S. Bendall, “An ‘Eagle’ Countermark on Sixth-Century Byzantine Coins,” *NC* 16 (1976): 230; J. E. Goehring, “Two New Examples of the Byzantine ‘Eagle’ Countermark,” *NC* 143 (1983): 218–20; J. D. Evans, “Heraclian Countermarks on Coins Found at Caesarea,” *AJNum* 5 (1993): 97–104, at 102–4; and Schulze and Goodwin, “Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria,” 39–40.

36 Goehring, “Two New Examples,” 218–20; Noeske, *Münzfunde as Ägypten I*, 1:383–84.

"Marea"/Philoxenite.³⁷ Furthermore, Wolfgang Hahn saw a similarity between the countermark and the eagle depicted on 3-nummi pieces minted in Alexandria.³⁸ In this case, only folles were countermarked and, as has been proven recently, these coins were first countermarked in Syro-Palestine (because of the number of countermarked coins found there)³⁹ and then found their way to Egypt.⁴⁰ Schulze has suggested Caesarea Maritima, besieged by the Arabs, as the mint where this operation was carried out.⁴¹ This thesis is challenged by Woods, who sees the eagle countermark as a symbol of the consulate, links it to the period of the Heraclian revolt against Phocas, and does not preclude its having been stamped in Egypt.⁴² Consequently, we cannot rule out the possibility that the dodecanummion in question made its way to Palestine, where the countermark was minted (dodecanummi are commonly found there, although they are largely imitations),⁴³ and then perhaps returned with pilgrims to "Marea"/Philoxenite. But an argument against such a route is that so far in Syro-Palestine this particular countermark is not yet known and no countermarked dodecanummi have been discovered there. New finds and further research are required to support or exclude this option.

No countermarking on Byzantine coins from Alexandria has been recognized so far. In contrast, in neighboring Syro-Palestine the countermarking of coins was common at the time of the war with the Arabs. This appears to have been an ad hoc procedure to ensure the liquidity of the fighting force, rather than an action taken on orders directly from Constantinople.⁴⁴ Coins were also countermarked in Syria after its final

conquest by the Arabs. It is most likely that countermarks containing Greek monograms, animals, and Arabic words were minted between 660 and 680.⁴⁵ One point that provides context for the countermark in question is that countermarks with the representation of the cross,⁴⁶ as well as the cross monogram,⁴⁷ were still minted after the conquest.

The open question remains why, in the case of Egypt, countermarks have so far been unknown. It should be noted that the monetary system in Egypt differed from the universal system in the Byzantine Empire. The system there was based on dodecanummi (12-nummi) and not on folles (40-nummi) as in the rest of the empire.⁴⁸ Consequently, it seems that other methods were also used to combat the scarcity of money, such as the overstriking of older coins.⁴⁹

Identification of the Monogram

The circular countermark is 6 mm in diameter and placed on the obverse. It contains a cross monogram aligned with the axis of the obverse at 2 o'clock. The lower right part is damaged by corrosion. At the 1. position in Michael Grünbart's schema⁵⁰—O1 Y1 C2 B3 A3 A4 (Figs. 3, 4)—on the upper bar, the ligature O+Y, traditional for Byzantine monograms, is most probably depicted (the O fragment is missing). The most corroded and therefore the most problematic element is the right arm, where probably C is depicted, perhaps

37 S. Jellonek, "A Follis with Eagle Countermark Discovered in 'Marea'/Philoxenite," in *Essays in Ancient Art and Archaeology in Honour of Ewdoksia Papuci-Władyka*, ed. J. Bodzek et al. (Kraków, 2024), 393–99.

38 Hahn, *Moneta Imperii Byzantini* (n. 17 above), 3:181–83; Evans, "Heraclian Countermarks on Coins Found at Caesarea," 103–4.

39 Schulze, "The Byzantine 'Eagle' Countermark" (n. 2 above), 116–17; Bijovsky, *Gold Coin and Small Change*, 410; Schulze and Goodwin, "Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria," 39–40.

40 Bijovsky, *Gold Coin and Small Change*, 410.

41 Schulze, "The Byzantine 'Eagle' Countermark," 113–20.

42 Woods, "The Byzantine Eagle Countermark" (n. 2 above), 932–45.

43 Bijovsky, *Gold Coin and Small Change*, 297–301.

44 Schulze and Goodwin, "Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria," 41–53; W. Schulze, I. Schulze, and W. Leimenstoll, "Heraclian

Countermarks on Byzantine Copper Coins in Seventh Century Syria," *BMGS* 30.1 (2006): 19–20.

45 Schulze and Goodwin, "Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria," 41–53.

46 Schulze and Goodwin, "Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria," 47.

47 Schulze and Goodwin, "Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria," 46; Woods, "Greek Monograms and Countermarks" (n. 26 above), 119–20.

48 Hahn with Metlich, *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire*, 62–63.

49 S. Abd el-Raouf Abbas, "Some Overstruck Coins from the Time of Heraclius," in *L'exception égyptienne? Production et échanges monétaires en Égypte hellénistique et romaine, Actes du colloque d'Alexandrie, 13–15 Avril 2002*, ed. F. Duyrat and O. Picard (Cairo, 2005), 339–52.

50 M. Grünbart, "Das Kreuz mit den Monogrammen—und eine Vernetzte Lösungsstrategie," in *Liber Amicorum: Claus Pelling zum 90. Geburtstag*, ed. T. Finkenauer and A. Nordheim (Tübingen, 2022), 71–80, at 77–79.

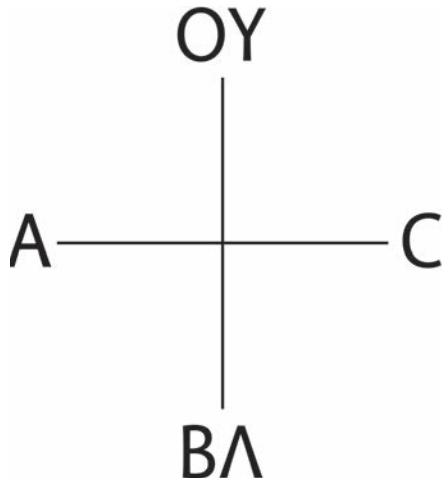


Fig. 3. Monogram schema. Drawing by author.

together with some more illegible marks. On the lower bar (3.) is the ligature B and Λ. On the left arm (4.), A is depicted, but suspended below rather than on the axis of the arm. At 5., at the intersection of the beams, some residue is visible, but it seems to be part of O.

If we use the Fink–Seibt–Grünbart analytical method of organizing readable letters in alphabetical order,⁵¹ the letters read are A, B, I, Λ, O, C, Y.⁵² Thus, the most probable interpretation of the monogram is *Βασιλείου*, or the name Basilius (*Βασίλειος*) in the genitive case. It is obviously not the royal title (*βασιλεύς*), which would be *βασιλεῖ* in the genitive. The closest analogy is the reverse of a seal, dating to the sixth/seventh century, that is held by Dumbarton Oaks;⁵³ but in that case, the letters A and Λ have swapped places. Unfortunately, the identification of a historical figure seems impossible at present. Only three candidates, all of them doubtful, are worth mentioning. The first is Basilius, a *chartoularios* (an official in charge of the

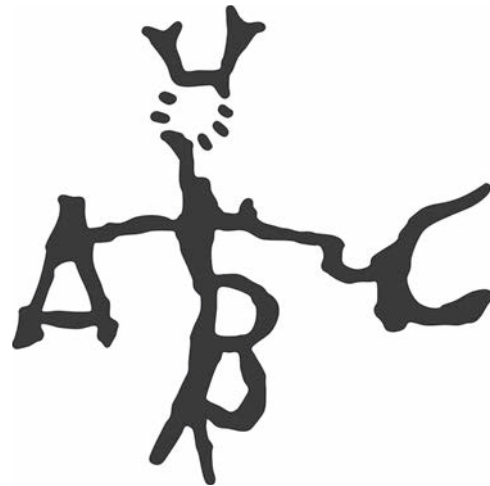


Fig. 4. Outline of the countermark. Drawing by author.

treasury) in the seventh century who is known only from his seal.⁵⁴ The second, Flavius Basilius, was indeed active in Egypt and also was given the title of Arsinoe's *defensor civitatis* in 618.⁵⁵ The third is Basilius, a pagarch of central Egypt known from the Kurrah papyri, whose years of activity are in the late seventh/early eighth century.⁵⁶ From the se papyri, we learn that the caliph was not satisfied with the debts that Basilius had incurred.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, it is most likely that none of them had anything to do with the countermark in question. The first one's origin is unknown. However, it is worth noting that the incumbent of the chartoularios office may indeed have bestowed countermarks, as evidenced by the monogram on the A9 countermark from Syria deciphered as Patrikios chartoularios.⁵⁸ The second seems to have been active too early, as the coin itself dates from the last decade of Heraclius. The activity of the third one, in contrast, falls during the monetary

51 W. Fink, "Das Byzantinische Monogramm" (PhD diss., University of Vienna, 1971); R. Feind, *Byzantinische Monogramme und Eigennamen* ([Regenstauf], 2016), 28; W. Seibt, "The Use of Monograms on Byzantine Seals in the Early Middle-Ages (6th to 9th Centuries)," *Parekbolai* 6.28 (2016): 1–14, at 11–12; Grünbart, "Das Kreuz mit den Monogrammen," 71–80.

52 I (iota) is not usually represented in cross monograms. See Grünbart, "Das Kreuz mit den Monogrammen," 75.

53 Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, BZS.1947.2.1180 (<https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1947.2.1180/view>).

54 *PLRE* 3:176, Basilius 10; Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, BZS.1958.106.3989 (<https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1958.106.3989/view>).

55 *PLRE* 3:176.

56 N. Abbott, *The Kurrah Papyri from Aphrodito in the Oriental Institute*, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 15 (Chicago, 1958); G. Ruffini, *Life in an Egyptian Village in Late Antiquity: Aphrodito before and after the Islamic Conquest* (Cambridge, 2018), 8, 203.

57 P.Lond. 4 1338 (<https://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.lond;4;1338>).

58 Schulze and Goodwin, "Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria," 46; Woods ("Greek Monograms and Countermarks," 118–19) deciphers it as *charaktēs* (coiner, stamper).

reform of Abd al-Malik, and the papyrus in question is dated to 709, a period in which Byzantine coins were no longer countermarked.

The Time, Place, and Reason for Countermarking Coins in Byzantine Egypt

Since it is impossible to identify the person responsible for the countermark on the coin, we must turn to considering the time, place, and reason for its issue. The Syrian countermarks, as mentioned above, were struck during the war with the Arabs and later after the conquest. It seems that the case of Egypt offers an analogous situation. Thus, the broadest chronological range stretches from the beginning of the Arab invasion of Egypt (639) to the reform of Abd al-Malik in 696/7.⁵⁹

The conquest of Egypt had already begun seven years after the Prophet's death, and three years later, in 642, Arab armies entered Alexandria.⁶⁰ In 645 Constans II attempted to retake Egypt, sending a fleet under his admiral Manuel to do so. Taking advantage of the absence of Amr ibn al-As, who had been called back to Mecca, the Byzantines captured Alexandria, but later that year they were defeated at Nikiou and forced to retreat to Alexandria, which, under Arab pressure, they finally left in 646.⁶¹

If we accept the hypothesis that the countermark was minted at the time of the conquest, then two possible periods emerge: the conquest of Egypt itself (639–642) or the temporary subjugation of the Nile delta by Manuel's army (645–646).

Let us consider the first possibility. The Syrian countermarks from the period of the Arab conquest

seem to have been made for economic reasons, but not to keep older coins in circulation.⁶² According to Schulze, the granting of countermarks for coins was supposed to take place in mobile military mints, and the countermarked coins would have acted as tokens enabling soldiers inside the camps to acquire goods; they also would have guaranteed promised pay in the face of a money shortage.⁶³ It was to be a temporary means of funding during the Arab invasions. Indeed, the relatively large number of coins signed with countermarks from Syro-Palestine—Schulze and Goodwin in 2005 knew of 173 specimens⁶⁴—seems to confirm how frequently this method was used. In Egypt, on the other hand, no other finds of Alexandrian coins bearing countermarks beyond the one mentioned are known. Perhaps this reflects the state of research. However, it is worth recalling that out of the thousands of coins collected by Hans-Christoph Noeske, there are no Alexandrian coins with countermarks. It therefore appears that in Egypt the countermarking of coins was only a short-lived phenomenon on a very small scale, which could be linked to Alexandria's being threatened by siege in 642. The analogy with the besieged Caesarea Maritima (637–640) immediately comes to mind, since of course coins were indeed countermarked there.⁶⁵ Alexandria seems an ideal place for such a procedure, as it housed a mint as well as both civil and military authorities. Unlike Caesarea, which defended itself for several years, the Egyptian capital was abandoned by the army after only a few months (in September 642).⁶⁶ According to Goodwin, the mint, together with its staff and equipment, might have been handed over to the Arabs and its employees perhaps continued to produce coins bearing the image

59 P. Grierson, "The Monetary Reforms of 'Abd al-Malik: Their Metrological Basis and Their Financial Repercussions," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 3.3 (1960): 241–64, at 244.

60 A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman Dominion*, 2nd ed., ed. P. M. Fraser (Oxford, 1978), 194–327; H. Kennedy, "Egypt as a Province in the Islamic Caliphate, 641–868," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, ed. C. F. Petry, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1998), 1:62–85, at 62–63; Booth, "The Muslim Conquest of Egypt Reconsidered" (n. 6 above), 639–70; P. Sijpesteijn, "The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Beginning of Muslim Rule," in *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300–700*, ed. R. Bagnall (Cambridge, 2007), 437–59, at 437; D. Sahas, *Byzantium and Islam: Collected Studies on Byzantine-Muslim Encounters* (London, 2021), 252–55.

61 Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*, 465–77; Sijpesteijn, "Arab Conquest of Egypt," 441.

62 Schulze, Schulze, and Leimenstoll, "Heraclian Countermarks on Byzantine Copper Coins" (n. 44 above), 17.

63 Schulze, Schulze, and Leimenstoll, "Heraclian Countermarks on Byzantine Copper Coins," 19–20.

64 Schulze and Goodwin, "Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria," 24.

65 Evans, "Heraclian Countermarks on Coins Found at Caesarea" (n. 35 above), 100–101; Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*, 275–327; Sahas, *Byzantium and Islam*, 253.

66 R. Charles, trans., *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu* (London, 1916), 184–94; Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*, 275–327; Sahas, *Byzantium and Islam*, 253.

of Constans II.⁶⁷ Assuming that he is correct, an abundance of coins were produced at the time so there was no need to countermark older issues.

But we should not forget the short-lived reconquest of Alexandria, which seems just as likely to have been the time when local coins could be countermarked. The Byzantine army occupied the Nile delta (and “Marea”/Philoxenite may also have come under its control) and moved south to Nikiou, where it was defeated; it then returned to and occupied Alexandria for several months. At this point, it is worth recalling the distinctiveness of the Egyptian monetary system and the uniqueness of this countermark—to date, the only one known to have been minted on a dodecanummion. Thus, it was the newly arrived imperial authorities under Manuel who may have initiated the countermarking of coins, perhaps in order to revalue the available money. Because the occupation of Alexandria was brief, the enterprise of countermarking coins may have been very limited, making countermarked dodecanummia very rare. On the one hand, coins with countermarks may have been used as tokens to obtain services offered in the besieged city, or to guarantee payment for service once the mission was completed.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the authorities in the besieged city may have seen revaluing money by countermarking coins as the easiest way to generate new funds to wage war.⁶⁹ In either case, Alexandria was taken by storm by Amr after just a few months.⁷⁰

In addition, a numismatically interesting passage from the chronicle of John of Nikiou seems relevant in this context. The bishop mentions the alleged cause of the death of the emperor Heraclius. He says that Heraclius died because of the minting of gold coins that bore the image of him and his sons but had no legend referring to the Roman state. At the end of the paragraph, he adds that after Heraclius’s death these images were removed.⁷¹ Of course, John is discussing gold coins, but the coin being analyzed here also

has an obverse with three figures and lacks a legend. The countermark itself was struck just on the obverse. Admittedly, in the early Principate period, countermarks sometimes appeared on figures erased owing to *damnatio memoriae*,⁷² but such a phenomenon is not known in Byzantine times. We should also note that whether in Syro-Palestine or Cyprus, countermarks appear overwhelmingly on the reverse.⁷³ Thus, the mere placement of the countermark on the obverse is already uncommon, and its coincidence with the information provided by John of Nikiou seems uncanny.

While the vast majority of countermarks in the seventh century appear on the reverse, those that were struck on the obverse are primarily from Syro-Palestine after the conquest. Schulze and Goodwin note that certain types of countermarks with Greek inscriptions or letters were preferred precisely on the obverse (A2, A3, A6, A10, A14, A15, A17).⁷⁴ Particularly relevant in the context of the countermark in question is type A10, which is also based on a cross. One might intuitively assume that countermarks based on the cross could not have appeared in a Muslim state, but nothing could be further from the truth: Schulze and Goodwin isolate three types of such countermarks used after the conquest of Syro-Palestine.⁷⁵ Type 10 is very simplified (“matchstick man”), while A9 and A11 are elaborate monograms in which one can read XAPT(O) VΛAPI(OC), the title of the official in charge of fiscal affairs.⁷⁶ Therefore, also in Egypt, and possibly specifically in Alexandria, a local chartoularios named Basilus may have been responsible for countermarking coins, just after the Arab conquest.



67 T. Goodwin, “Some Aspects of 7th C. Egyptian Byzantine Coinage,” in *Coinage and History in the Seventh Century Near East 4*, ed. A. Oddy, I. Schulze, and W. Schulze (London, 2015), 27–35, at 32–33.

68 Schulze, Schulze, and Leimenstoll, “Heraclian Countermarks on Byzantine Copper Coins,” 19.

69 Schulze, Schulze, and Leimenstoll, “Heraclian Countermarks on Byzantine Copper Coins,” 20.

70 Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*, 473–76.

71 John of Nikiou 116.8.3 (Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, 185).

72 An erased image of Geta with a nailed countermark appears on coins of Stratonikea (e.g., CNG Coins Electronic Auction 466, Lot 286).

73 Economides, “Byzantine Folles Countermarked with Heraclian Monograms” (n. 2 above), 196; Schulze and Goodwin, “Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria,” 24; Bijovsky, *Gold Coin and Small Change* (n. 24 above), 397–98.

74 Schulze and Goodwin, “Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria,” 42.

75 Schulze and Goodwin, “Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria,” 42, 46, nos. A9, A10, A11.

76 Schulze and Goodwin, “Countermarking in Seventh Century Syria,” 46.

A summary of considerations on the hitherto unpublished countermark must begin with indisputable facts. First of all, the coin was discovered during the archaeological excavations conducted at “Marea”/Philoxenite. This is sadly not the norm, as most known coins still originate from collections and auctions, and excavation coins are still rarely published. Second, it is the first Alexandrian dodecanummion coin containing a countermark presented in a scholarly publication. Third, the countermark was struck on the obverse rather than on the reverse as was usual at the time. Fourth, the countermark itself was hitherto unknown to researchers. The four observations above, in themselves, expand our knowledge of Alexandrian minting in the seventh century by proving that dodecanummia could be countermarked in Egypt.

Other assessments are much more speculative: the most certain of these is that the coin was struck during or after the Arab invasion, but before the reform of 696/7 in Egypt. I argue that the most probable context for countermarking coins in Egypt was the brief period of the Byzantines recapture of Alexandria, during which the incoming imperial troops locked in siege

could have struck them. That very limited procedure appears to have followed the orders of an official named Basilus, who may have been in charge of financial concerns (a *chartularios*). We can also be fairly certain that the countermark was bestowed in the midst of a financial crisis, as happened in other parts of the Middle East in the seventh century. Countermarking coins was the easiest way to raise funds during the war by revaluing available money.

I am aware that much of the above discussion remains in the realm of speculation, but it is only the beginning. Further research, archaeological as well as strictly numismatic, carried out both at “Marea”/Philoxenite and at other sites (e.g., Kom el-Dikka) will contribute to expanding knowledge regarding coin countermarking in seventh-century Egypt.

Faculty of Archaeology
University of Warsaw
Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28
00-927 Warsaw
Poland
s.jellonek@uw.edu.pl

 THIS ARTICLE WAS WRITTEN AS A RESULT of the research project “Coin Circulation in the Byzantine and Umayyad Marea/North Hawwariya: Studies in the Monetary Economy of Mareotis Region in the Hinterland of Alexandria,” funded by the National Science Centre, Poland, UMO–2020/39/B/HS3/03102. I wish to express my gratitude to project supervisor Piotr Jaworski, Barbara Zając, and Michał Mozyński, the numismatic team that has been examining more than 9,000 coins from “Marea”/Philoxenite, for their daily discussions during the research. I would

also like to thank David Woods and Tony Goodwin for their consultations in reading the countermark. I also appreciate the insights provided by Ewa Wipszycka and Tomasz Derda, the chief of Polish archaeological research at “Marea”/Philoxenite, on the economic, religious, and cultural context of Egypt in the seventh century. The work was much enhanced by the many wise observations from two anonymous reviewers, and Colin Whiting has been an excellent editor—helpful and productive at the same time. I am very grateful to everyone.